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ABSTRACT

Incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities. It occurs often in the workplace, during the use of computers, and in the process of completing tasks. Incidental learning occurs in many ways, including the following: through observation, repetition, social interaction, and problem solving; from implicit meanings in the classroom or workplace policies or expectations; by watching or talking to colleagues or experts about tasks; and from being forced to accept or adapt to situations. Incidental learning is situated, contextual, and social. It is thus characterized by those features that are considered most effective in formal learning situations. Incidental learning can result in improved competence, changed attitudes, and growth in interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness. Not all unplanned learning is effective, however. Because incidental learning is often not recognized or labeled as learning by learners or others, it is difficult to measure and harness for use. Adult learners often do not distinguish between formally and incidentally acquired learning or prefer incidental learning opportunities to formal ones. Several researchers have examined the issue of how educators can help learners make incidental learning outcomes explicit. An annotated bibliography listing 21 print and Web resources constitutes approximately 75% of this document. (MN)

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Incidental Learning

Incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities. It occurs often in the workplace and when using computers, in the process of completing tasks (Baskett 1993; Cahoon 1995). It happens in many ways: through observation, repetition, social interaction, and problem solving (Cahoon 1995; Rogers 1997); from implicit meanings in classroom or workplace policies or expectations (Leroux and Lafleur 1995); by watching or talking to colleagues or experts about tasks (van Tillaart et al. 1998); from mistakes, assumptions, beliefs, and attributions (Cseh, Watkins, and Marsick 1999); or from being forced to accept or adapt to situations (English 1999). This "natural" way of learning (Rogers 1997) has characteristics of what is considered most effective in formal learning situations: it is situated, contextual, and social.

Incidental learning can result in improved competence, changed attitudes, and growth in interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness (McFerrin 1999; Mealman 1993; Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). However, not all unplanned learning is effective. Ford and Herren (1995) and Leroux and Lafleur (1995) highlight the "hit or miss" nature of incidental learning, and Dodge (1998) reports more serious consequences—for example, in the "learned" subversion of occupational safety practices in the workplace.

Incidental learning is often not recognized or labeled as learning by learners or others (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995) and thus it is difficult to measure and harness for use. However, "unintended consequences of a learning situation are often more important to the learner than the original objectives" (McFerrin 1999, p. 1). Adult learners often do not distinguish between formally and incidentally acquired learning (Mealman 1993) or prefer incidental learning opportunities to formal ones (Cahoon 1995; Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). Seniors in Woods and Daniel's (1998) study retained incidental learning that was personally meaningful.

How can educators help learners make incidental learning outcomes explicit? Mealman (1993) explains how to create a climate that fosters incidental learning. Other suggestions include opportunities for social exchanges (Lawrence 2000; ***Powerful Partnerships*** 1998), arrangement of the workplace (Brown and Duguid 2000); development of critical reflection skills (Cseh et al. 1999); and facilitation activities (LearnScope Team 2000). The following resources provide additional information.

Baskett, H. K. M. "Workplace Factors Which Enhance Self-directed Learning." Paper presented to the Seventh International Symposium on Self-Directed Learning, West Palm Beach, FL, January 21-23, 1993. http://www.artsci-ccwin.concordia.ca/education/girat/PALMBEACSD2.html

Most work-related learning occurs informally and incidentally and is self-directed. As one moves from planned and "other-directed" learning to informal learning and incidental learning embedded in experience, the visibility and distinctiveness of learning as a separate act diminishes.

Brown, J.S., and Duguid, P. ***The Social Life of Information***. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

Good office design can produce powerful learning environments. But much of that power comes from incidental learning. In the absence of good design, the need for more cumbersome formal learning and informing processes increases.

Cahoon, B. B. "Computer Skill Learning in the Workplace: A Comparative Case Study." Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1995. http://www.gactr.uga.edu/~cahoonb/dissertation.html

In the workplace, most learning occurs in the course of work practices. Incidental learning about computers through mutual problem solving and coaching had been more important in skill development than formal training. Incidental learning appears to constitute a socialization process.

Collins, M. P., and Berge, Z. L. "Mailing Lists as a Venue for Adult Learning." Paper presented at the Eastern Adult, Continuing and Distance Education Research Conference, University Park, PA, October 24-26, 1996. http://www.emoderators.com/papers/EACDERC.html

Although online discussion group members can articulate an intention to learn from the discussion, much incidental learning also occurs. In a survey of group members, 29 percent said their learning from the discussion is incidental and 53 percent said they learn both incidentally and deliberately at different times.

Cseh, M.; Watkins, K. E.; and Marsick, V. J. "Re-conceptualizing Marsick and Watkins' Model of Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace." In ***Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings, Arlington, Virginia, March 3-7, 1999***, edited by K. P. Kuchinke. (ED 431 944)

Findings of a study of critical learning experiences of Romanian small business owners were used to extend Marsick and Watkins' model to include both the sequences of learning processes and the language people used to describe them.

Dodge, R. B. "Unintentional Learning and the Occupational Health and Safety Experience." ***Education + Training*** 40, no. 3 (1998): 109-114. (EJ 564 888)

Evidence from the occupational safety and health field suggests that much unintentional learning that takes place in the workplace is not a result of conscious decisions and lacks critical reflection. Such learning may have negative consequences. Action can be taken to identify and mitigate the effects of unintentional learning.

English, L. M. "Learning from Changes in Religious Leadership: A Study of Informal and Incidental Learning at the Parish Level." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 18, no. 5 (September-October 1999): 385-394. (EJ 594 497)

Observations and interviews of 20 parishioners in Catholic rural parishes led by female lay pastors in the absence of priests identified conditions influencing incidental learning, including experience of change and the need to take action.

Ford, F. A., and Herren, R. V. "The Teaching of Work Ethics: Current Practices of Work Program Coordinators in Georgia." ***Journal of Vocational Education Research*** 20, no. 1 (1995): 79-95. (EJ 509 511)

Work program coordinators in Georgia believe they are prepared to teach work ethics. However, their actual teaching of work ethics was informal or unintentional.

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Lawrence, R. L. "Transcending Boundaries: Building Community through Residential Adult Learning." Chicago, IL: National-Louis University, 2000. http://www.nl.edu/ace/Resources/Documents/TranscendingBoundaries.html

Much incidental learning occurred in a degree program that was not attributed to the course content itself. In a residential workshop, learning took place during evening social activities, on porch steps, during meals, at the computer lab, and in people's rooms late at night.

LearnScope Team. "Incidental Learning." Australian National Training Authority, June 25, 2000. http://www.learnscope.anta.gov.au/display_stories/1-90000/2101-2400/display_stories_2170.html

The nature of work-based learning is that things don't always go according to plan. A challenge is to identify how these changes contribute to learning. A learning facilitator can help participants recognize incidental learning through reflection, critical questioning, focus group discussions, and debriefing sessions.

Leroux, J. A., and Lafleur, S. "Employability Skills: The Demands of the Workplace." ***Vocational Aspect of Education*** 47, no. 2 (1995): 189-196. (EJ 509 524)

Secondary teachers in Ontario reported that their teaching of employability skills was indirect—students absorbed them through classroom policies and management practices.

Matlay, H. "Organisational Learning in Small Learning Organisations." ***Education + Training*** 42, nos. 4-5 (2000): 202-210.

Most of the learning in small British businesses surveyed was incidental and sporadic. Only a fraction of incidental knowledge was communicated to others; thus it did not contribute significantly to organizational development.

McFerrin, K. M. "Incidental Learning in a Higher Education Asynchronous Online Distance Education Course." In ***SITE 99: Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference Proceedings***, edited by J. D. Price et al. Charlottesville, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education, 1999. (ED 432 288)

Two types of incidental learning outcomes were observed: one from the students' use of the technology itself and the second centered on an increase in time management ability, self-directive behavior, self-confidence, and self-discipline.

Mealman, C. A. "Incidental Learning by Adults in Nontraditional Degree Program." In ***Proceedings of the 12th Annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference***, edited by K. Freer and G. Dean. Columbus: Ohio State University, 1993. (ED 362 663) http://www.nl.edu/ace/Resources/Documents/Incidental.html

Incidental and intentional learning played equally important roles in adults' overall experience. Incidental learning was fostered through small-group interaction, flexible course assignments, peer stories, application of learning in work and personal contexts, instructor-facilitated discussions, and applied research assignments.

Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998. http://www.naspa.org/powerful_partnerships.htm

Much learning takes place informally and incidentally, beyond explicit teaching or the classroom. Faculty can enhance informal and incidental learning in specific ways.

Quigley, B. A. "Beyond Participation and Stereotypes: Towards the Study of Engagement in Adult Literacy Education." Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, Vancouver, BC, June 2-4, 2000. http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2000/quigleya1-web.htm

A major proportion of formally undereducated adults are very much engaged in informal and incidental learning. Study of the more informal and incidental forms of engagement in learning would reveal the learning that occurs through social networks.

Rogers, A. "Learning: Can We Change the Discourse?" ***Adults Learning*** 8, no. 5 (January 1997): 116-117. (EJ 540 449)

Argues that adult educators use "learning" when they mean "education" and that this confounds and demeans incidental and informal learning processes. Suggests that adult educators need to build on how individuals learn naturally and incidentally.

Ross-Gordon, J. M., and Dowling, W. D. "Adult Learning in the Context of African-American Women's Voluntary Organizations." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 14, no. 4 (July-August 1995): 306-319. (EJ 507 794)

African-American women involved in voluntary organizations reported frequent informal, incidental learning opportunities, resulting in changed ability to interact with others, growing self-confidence, and greater connection to group and community. They preferred this learning to formal education.

Sambrook, S., and Stewart, J. "Influencing Factors on Lifelong Learning and HRD Practices." Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Lahti, Finland, September 1999. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000001160.htm

Changes in work are shifting the role of human resource professionals from formal training to supporting and capturing incidental learning in the workplace.

van den Tillaart, H.; van den Berg, S.; and Warmerdam, J. ***Work and Learning in Micro-enterprises in the Printing Industry***. Thessaloniki, Greece: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 1998. (ED 426 230)

Case studies in the printing industry show that many employees kept their qualifications up to date through incidental learning (including learning by solving problems individually or with colleagues, asking for help from experienced colleagues, and learning under the boss or an experienced worker).

Woods, L. L., and Daniel, L. G. "Effects of a Tourism Awareness Program on the Attitudes and Knowledge of Older Adults." ***Educational Gerontology*** 24, no. 1 (January-February 1998): 69-78. (EJ 556 495)

Results of a study showed that older adults can learn from incidental exposure to information (obtained by attending a lecture and film on tourism) and retain it.

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